
UNIT 6 CRITICAL PERSPECTIVES

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6.0 OBJECTIVES

The objective of this unit is to provide an overview of the various approaches to Jane Austen offered by literary criticism and theory, as well as to trace the changing perspectives on her work in recent years. I offer an outline of the varying emphases that have been laid on different aspects of her work by various schools and critics. So while the text under consideration is kept in mind, a great deal of what you read here refers to Jane Austen's other novels as well, some knowledge of which would help your study of *Pride and Prejudice*.

6.1 INTRODUCTION

Jane Austen's work has traditionally been considered an important and formative part of the development of the realist novel – particularly the novel of social and domestic comedy—in England. All the same, there have been (both within this framework and outside it) a number of shifts in opinion regarding the treatment of, and the positions taken on, the acknowledged themes of women, love, money and marriage. In an introduction to a recent anthology, Harish Trivedi provides a useful overview of critical attitudes to Austen, beginning with the comment that the anonym she used (“A Lady”) has given rise to mistaken conceptions of her work as ‘refined’ in a ‘feminine’ or ‘genteel’ way, when in fact it is exactly the very same feminine refinements that she comes down upon so heavily. Most of the adverse opinion on her work bases itself chiefly on pointing out what is missing rather than faulting what is present. The uncritical adulation her work received in the nineteenth century is both mocked at and shared by some writers in the early twentieth century – witness Kipling's short story *The Janeites* (1923) in which Jane Austen's admirers form a secret society, and EM Forster's double-edged take on ‘the Janeites’ – “She is my favourite author! I read and re-read, the mouth open and the mind closed...” – while pretending to be one among them.

The work of D.W. Harding and Marvin Mudrick, in the 1940s and 50s together initiated the overthrow of the traditional view of Jane Austen's work as charmingly ladylike, by setting out to look at the extent to which her use of irony incorporates a strong dislike and contempt not just for the abstraction called ‘society’ but also for individual foibles. Criticism ever since has focussed on the subversive power of her work, on the way in which it problematizes many of the realities it apparently celebrates (marriage, for example) and, increasingly, on the ways in which her texts are themselves open to readings which problematize them, as well as those that take

into account their historical and philosophical contexts, which areas tend to be ignored in New Critical readings.

6.2 THE FEMINIST APPROACH

Beginning with Virginia Woolf in *A Room of One's Own* (1929), and including the work of Kate Millet, Elaine Showalter, Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar, feminist readings of Jane Austen cover a field as wide as the many strands and varied concerns of feminist thought itself. Most of these have, however dealt with her views of marriage and treatment of gender. Problem-areas for feminist criticism of Jane Austen have tended to be her ignoring of sexual activity (the stress is on the absence of female sexuality) and the female body, as well as her apparent political conservatism, read as an implicit acceptance of the dominant patriarchal ideology.

As a point of entry into this discussion, please stop for a minute and take another look at the distinction between the terms 'female' and 'feminine' in 4.6. You will remember that the two words were respectively used to refer to a set of biological characteristics, and a set of culturally defined ones. Elaine Showalter, however, offers a completely different usage for these terms in the area of women's writing, in the process also providing a perspective on 'feminism'. She suggests in *A Literature of Their Own* (1982) that the feminine stage of women's writing involves a period when the prevalent, dominant standards and tradition are imitated and internalized. The feminist stage of women's writing involves an emphasis on the rights and values of the minority (women) as well as a valorization of their difference, and the female stage is one of self-discovery and the establishment of a separate and distinct identity. Do you see Jane Austen as falling into such a system of classification, and if so, where? Her work has most often been seen as part of the first stage (that of the 'feminine stage') but there are quite a few problems involved in making her fit neatly into such a category. The case made most often for doing so centres on her privileging of the domestic — allied with the feminine — over the 'public' sphere of politics. Jane Austen has been accused of restricting women to domesticity in her fiction because she appears to leave out politics and religion almost completely, and avoids making any direct reference to major historical events like the French Revolution which took place in her lifetime. There is only a small direct reference towards the end of *Pride and Prejudice* to the Napoleonic wars between England and France, even though she could not have been unaware of the importance of these events or of the widespread effect they had in England. Among other things feminism seeks to describe as well as to explain the history of the subordination and marginalization of women and to show that values like 'reason' are not universal ones but those of man at a certain point in history. Even the domestic/private divide is a cultural one. Gender is seen as one strand in the construction of the social identity and also recognized as a performative act. Can we see something of this in Jane Austen's representation of women? Feminist criticism also looks at the ways in which women are stereotyped and constrained by patriarchal society, and asks whether the text is critical of, or complicit with such stereotypes.

Feminist criticism also questions the implicit male bias of historical theory in general which leads to the idea that 'history' only deals with the 'public' area of political conflict or of the market, the conception of the 'heroic' as an inevitably public category, linked to empires and wars, and the notion of progress in history, when it is seen only in such terms. They argue that if history is supposed to demonstrate eternal truths about human nature and conduct, women's history cannot be ignored, since an inclusion of the domestic helps to bring about a different conception of history, widening the scope of the term itself. This kind of history writing offers a different perspective of the aspects of life that are traditionally considered heroic, since war is not always necessarily a noble subject to women, who have to cope with the loss and pain it brings, without being allowed the glory that comes of participating actively on

the battlefield. Women's history also draws parallels between the domestic and the military experience, pointing out how both involve violence, and complex negotiations as part of a struggle for control – something clearly evident in Jane Austen's portrayals of men and women, not only married couples like the Bennets, but also people in love like Elizabeth and Darcy. The area – whether of marriage or of courtship—within which they interact often begins to look like a battlefield.

Is Jane Austen then being evasive or deliberately microcosmic in choosing to ignore the larger political developments of her day? One answer might be available to us if we remember that the polarization of sex roles and identities was actually much less sharp in the Augustan than in the Victorian period, partly because, (as mentioned earlier in 3.2.1) women played a greater part in economic affairs in this period than they did later. The charge of evasion also doesn't take into account the significance that the small details of daily social life acquire in her work, which sees them as an embodiment of the codes, standards and proprieties which the community has evolved for its collective life. A chosen emphasis on the microcosmic could also be one way of interpreting Jane Austen's famous description of her work as "two square inches of ivory".

Austen has been accused of ignoring sexuality especially in the portrayal of women. There may be some truth in this as far as the depiction of sexual acts is concerned (to wish it otherwise is to ignore the social and literary constraints under which these novels were written). But as far as the treatment of women's sexuality is concerned, Lydia is a clear example to the contrary. Even the condemnation of sexuality in some instances (Lydia again for instance) is not in terms of the vice/virtue dichotomy of the Victorian novel (in Dickens' novels for example, the women characters usually fall into the categories of 'angel' or of 'fallen woman') but in terms of irrationality, of a failure of reason and good sense. Though pedantry is seen as the recourse of an unattractive woman (refer to the discussion of Mary's character in 4.4) on the whole a sound education and learning is advocated for women in Austen's novels, and the heroines are all well-read women, there does appear to be a parallel being drawn between education and the acquiring of 'reason'. I would see Jane Austen's endorsement of marriage as a far from unqualified approval of a reality that she does recognize as best guaranteed to ensure security and happiness for women in her world. So while the novels all end in companionate (and happy) marriages, basic inequalities remain unresolved beneath the ideal. Elizabeth for instance will have no money of her own and will be completely dependent on Darcy, and she knows this in jokingly mentioning his "beautiful grounds at Pemberley". Jane Austen was herself dependent on the income from her books to retain any kind of self-sufficiency, so she knew how difficult it could be for an intelligent and independent woman to accept such a situation of dependence.

6.3 POSTCOLONIAL READINGS

Postcolonial criticism and theory deals with, broadly, the social, political, cultural and economic practices which arise in response or in resistance to colonialism and imperialism. It looks at the ways in which different cultures constitute themselves through the projection of 'otherness' (in literature and otherwise), and at the process of canon formation as a denial of the value of the peripheral and the marginal.

Postcolonialism sees a connection between the growth of the English novel and that of Empire in that the two are simultaneous and hence inextricably bound up with each other. How much of this applies to Austen? Empire is certainly not as obvious a concern in her novels as it is in later fiction like that of Kipling and Conrad, but a useful analogy can be drawn with Forster, in whose work (as in Austen's) empire enters the space of the drawing room around which the novel of social comedy is constructed. Empire is here not nearly as peripheral a subject as it might appear, since

it is shown to be one of the factors that constitutes the genteel society being portrayed.

Susan Fraiman traces the picture of Jane Austen's "unworldliness" to scholars who have tended to remove her from her social milieu, looking at her work in isolation as if it had nothing to do with current events. Criticizing as "patronizing" the view that Austen was oblivious to larger events and mass-movements because she chose to concentrate on the local, Fraiman points out that scholars like Q.D Leavis and Claudia Johnson have challenged standard critical editions of Jane Austen's work which ignore her references to slaves and riots, preferring to dwell instead on her descriptions of ballrooms. Edward Said in *Culture and Imperialism* (1993) does move away from such readings in stressing the references to Caribbean slavery in *Mansfield Park*, but does hold the view that Jane Austen sees Sir Thomas Bertram's colonial property as necessary to the preservation of the wealth and lifestyle of Mansfield Park. Fraiman locates Said's reading of Austen as "unthinking" in her references to India and to Antigua, in "his overall contention that nineteenth-century European culture, and especially the English novel, unwittingly but systematically helped to gain consent for imperialist policies ... The novels was, Said asserts, one of the primary discourses contributing to a 'consolidated vision', virtually uncontested, of England's righteous imperial prerogative. Austen is no different from Thackeray or Dickens, then, in her implicit loyalty to official Eurocentrism." (on line essay at <http://www2.uchicago.edu/jnl.crit.inq/v21/v21n4.fraiman.html>)

She goes on to point out the limitations of Said's argument in that he ignores the fact that *Mansfield Park* is isolated from the rest of Austen's work, and his "disembodied" picture that allows him to ignore Austen's gender in clubbing her together with male writers. For example, Said specifies that Conrad manages an ironic distance in his portrayal of empire because he is not a "wholly incorporated and fully acculturated Englishman", but doesn't seem to see that Austen could hardly have come under this category. While Said rightly points out that Austen's construction of the West as "center, home, and norm" is one of the ways of making colonialism thinkable, he fails to notice how her position as a woman, a spinster, and a writer marginalizes her, and allows her to voice (with irony) the experience of exile from at least some societal norms.

Fraiman's arguments provide an instance of the overlapping of feminist and postcolonial critical concerns, and of the common area that they can jointly address. A look at a critical debate like the one above also ought to give you some idea of the ways in which postcolonial readings look at different aspects of Jane Austen's work by examining the naturalizing of constructed values such as 'civilization' and 'humanity', and paying attention (as she does) to the themes of home, place, belonging and displacement, as formative of individual identity. The individual is seen to appropriate – and be appropriated by – the other in a relationship of power.

Another issue in the postcolonial enterprise is the decentring or the pluralizing of the canon. It is interesting in this context to consider the importance and the perceived relevance of studying Jane Austen in Indian universities, where "English literature" still largely means a canon consisting of British authors. What is the place of Jane Austen in the context of an independent India, or as the question is put in Upamanyu Chatterjee's *English, August*, what is Jane Austen doing in Meerut? Does the very fact of choosing Jane Austen for inclusion in syllabi reveal an internalized idea of what the 'canon' ought to consist of? Many Indian students, when reading Austen's novels, draw parallels between her society and theirs, citing as common factors the rigid class-structure, the restrictions placed upon women, and the emphasis on surface appearances. I'd like you to take a look at this passage from an article by Pankaj Mishra, providing an assessment of contemporary Indian English writing. He is speaking particularly of Vikram Seth's *A Suitable Boy*:

For all its self-consciously broad canvas—which includes low-caste peasants, the besieged feudal gentry, the flourishing colonial middle class—it sticks close to a basic Jane Austenish dilemma. Who will Lata Mehra marry? ...

The adaptation of Jane Austen to upper-caste Indian marriages doesn't work here: Seth lacks her irony, and his characters lack the inner freedom her characters so strikingly possess. In its celebration of Indian middle class life, *A Suitable Boy* expresses the complacent faith in India that R.K. Narayan has been criticized for in the past except that the faith, in this instance, is not Hindu, but an accessory of the nineteenth-century realist tradition: something almost unconsciously inherited from Jane Austen and George Eliot. However Austen and Eliot wrote out of the relative security of their imperial societies; their works express some of the general optimism of the English novel that Henry James rather cattily pointed out, in an essay on Maupassant, was the "optimism of women and spinsters," "of ignorance as well as of delicacy." When encountered in *A Suitable Boy* the same optimism cannot but appear incongruous; and to enter it requires suppressing everything you know about the dereliction of North India.

(*The New York Review of Books* Volume XLVI, Number 9, May 20, 1999, p.50.)

Though he is supposedly talking about Seth's novel, Mishra lets fall, in the process, a number of preconceptions, both about Jane Austen (notice that he doesn't contradict Henry James' statement) and about her relevance to Indian writing. He sees this relevance as only technical or thematic, i.e. she provides a model (not even always useful) of realist techniques for dealing with the themes of marriage and money, but no more than that. I think both assumptions are questionable, especially the one that supposes Jane Austen's complete adherence to the 'relative security' of her 'imperial society'. One of the directions that our questioning takes is to look instead at how Jane Austen deals with class-structures and identities, as well as at the contrast between the town and the country in her fiction. These concerns therefore form part of the discussion in the next section.

6.4 THE MARXIST PERSPECTIVE

Marxist criticism focuses on the material conditions in and around the text, which would include the conditions of its production, and the issues of class and labour both as they appear in the text and in its production. Marx sees social being as determining consciousness, and economic conditions as underlying social ones. To read these concerns into any given text, mean asking whether it deals with history and classes as stable or not, whether or not it welcomes change or reveals a 'revolutionary' consciousness'. Such a reading also involves an analysis of the relations of exploitation and domination which, according to Marxist thought, determine the cultural life of all societies, following from the belief that material interests dominate mental systems. Power relations do not function unilaterally, since while an elite (in any society) is formed by them, it also forms the other classes in turn. What makes the process possible is the fact that the norms of the dominant culture slowly become internalized. There are of course within this broad framework many different 'Marxisms', not always in agreement with each other. Traditional Marxist criticism examines how novels get published, how they deal with different classes, and the forms, styles and meanings that emerge in them as products of social, historical and economic conditions. Marxist criticism argues that despite the realist writer's attempt to unify the text, and to erase contradictions, the textual process by its very nature inevitably produces gaps in this apparent 'unity'. This point needs some elaboration — poststructuralist criticism speaks of the "classic realist text" as an instrument of ideology, based on the pretence that bourgeois culture is "natural", and using the dominance of the authorial voice in fiction as a device to limit meaning. Jane Austen has been criticized since she does appear to take for granted the existence of class-

society (though she doesn't necessarily see it as fixed or static). In addition, her fiction appears to subscribe to the Christian-humanist notion of the autonomy and responsibility of the individual self, and certain values are clearly endorsed while others are rejected.

The study of the ideology of gender provides a meeting point between Marxist and Feminist criticism in studying how considerations of gender affect the way in which men and women's writings are read. Marxist readings of fictional texts also require that attention be paid to the role of money in the text, and how the characters' lives are determined by their class and economic status (or the author's life by hers.) In what ways are these concerns relevant to *Pride and Prejudice*? They appear to enter the novel only marginally through the minor characters—servants like Mrs. Hall and governesses like Mrs. Jenkins—who, like the tenant farmers, ostler and bailiff in *Emma*, are present but who rarely (if ever) speak. However Raymond Williams suggests a closer look at the different histories and situations in the novels of families we tend to group together under the category of 'gentry':

It is a truth universally acknowledged, that Jane Austen chose to ignore the decisive historical events of her time. Where, it is still asked, are the Napoleonic wars: the real current of history? But history has many currents, and the social history of the landed families, at that time in England, was among the most important. As we sense its real processes, we find that they are quite central and structural in Jane Austen's novels. All that prevents us from realising this is that familiar kind of retrospect, taking in Penshurst and Saxham and Buck's Head and Mansfield Park and Norland and even Poynton, in which all country houses and their families are seen as belonging, effectively, to a single tradition: that of the cultivated rural gentry. The continual making and remaking of these houses and their families is suppressed..., and Jane Austen's world can then be taken for granted, even sometimes patronised as a rural backwater, as if it were a simple 'traditional' setting.... Darcy, in *Pride and Prejudice*, is a landowner established for 'many generations,' but his friend Bingley has inherited £100,00 and is looking for an estate to purchase. Sir William Lucas has risen from trade to a knighthood; Mr. Bennett has £2000 a year, but an entailed estate, and has married the daughter of an attorney, whose brother is in trade.... The paradox of Jane Austen is then the achievement of a unity of tone, of a settled and remarkably confident way of seeing and judging, in the chronicle of confusion and change. (*The Country and the City* (1973) pp 113-5)

Here is an example of Marxist criticism which makes it clear that the realities and nuances of social change and movement are not being ignored at all by the text.

Another way in which these enter Jane Austen's work is in the highlighting of the differences between life in the town and that in the country, and the character's differing attitudes towards both. The country in these novels is not a pastoral idyll, but very definitely has its share of hardship, which is often hinted at even if it is not directly dwelt upon. Neither does Jane Austen adhere to the contemporary stereotype (at least in literature) of country life as harmonious and contented in contrast to the city as deceptive and inhospitable, though she comes close to such a portrayal in *Mansfield Park*.

The word 'country' was also used at the time to refer to county or shire. Recent historians have debated the existence and importance of distinct county communities. Some argue for an awareness of the county as a focus of loyalty among the elite, while others insist that the elite throughout the nation, looked instead to London as the center of a common educational pattern and culture. Here are some examples from *Pride and Prejudice* of instances where the town/country divide comes up in conversation and description. Notice how each passage serves as a comment on the thoughts, values, and the varying degrees of social snobbery of the characters who are speaking or being described:

“ ‘You have a house in town, I conclude?’

Mr. Darcy bowed.

‘I had once some thoughts of fixing in town myself — for I am fond of superior society; but I did not feel quite certain that the air of London would agree with Lady Lucas.’ ”

“The village of Longbourn was only one mile from Meryton; a most convenient distance for the young ladies, who were usually tempted thither three or four times a week, to pay their duty to their aunt, and to a milliner's shop just over the way. The two youngest of the family, Catherine and Lydia, were particularly frequent in these attentions; their minds were more vacant than their sisters', and when nothing better offered, a walk to Meryton was necessary to amuse their morning hours and furnish conversation for the evening; and however bare of news the country in general might be, they always contrived to learn some from their aunt.”

“ ‘To walk three miles, or four miles, or five miles, or whatever it is, above her ankles in dirt, and alone, quite alone! what could she mean by it? It seems to me to shew an abominable sort of conceited independence, a most country town indifference to decorum.’ ”

“Mrs. Bennet, who fancied she had gained a complete victory over him, continued her triumph.

‘I cannot see that London has any great advantage over the country for my part, except the shops and public places. The country is a vast deal pleasanter, is not it, Mr. Bingley?’

‘When I am in the country,’ he replied, ‘I never wish to leave it; and when I am in town it is pretty much the same. They have each their advantages, and I can be equally happy in either.’ ”

“ ‘Do you draw?’

‘No, not at all.’

.. ‘That is very strange. But I suppose you had no opportunity. Your mother should have taken you to town every spring for the benefit of masters.”

‘My mother would have had no objection, but my father hates London.’ ”

“Lady Catherine ... condescended to wait on them at Pemberley, in spite of that pollution which its woods had received, not merely from the presence of such a mistress, but the visits of her uncle and aunt from the city.”

Despite this mocking of social pretensions, and the fact that Jane Austen makes no direct correlation between material means or possessions and ‘gentility’ in the sense of superior behaviour or character, there does appear to be a tentative connection being drawn between them. Elizabeth’s visit to Pemberley, and her listening to Darcy’s housekeeper praising him are important factors that go a long way in changing her opinion of him. The importance given to Darcy in the role of employer does mean that such a role (i.e. one of power) is seen as one which reveals true character. Jane Austen might well be criticized for saying implicitly that the role of employer is necessary to Darcy’s identity, and above all to revealing his virtue.

Lastly, one can see how Marxist thought feeds into the area of ‘cultural studies’ by bringing to attention the controlling (and visualizing) of our experience by the media, through the creation of new ways of ‘seeing’ as well as new images. Cinema and television are of course the most powerful of such media. To digress for a moment consider the 1946 movie version of *Pride and Prejudice*, with Lawrence Olivier and Greer Garson playing Darcy and Elizabeth. The film uses Victorian costume instead of Regency dress, and the shift is a significant one since it plays on the popular

notions of 'Victorianism' in the viewer's minds, highlighting a certain stereotypical 'propriety' and 'prudery' which are actually not particularly relevant to Jane Austen's period. All the same, the impact of the film is such as to leave the viewer (especially the viewer who has not read Jane Austen) with inaccurate impressions of the period in which the book is set. Now to return to an idea mentioned at the beginning of this section, think again of the 'conditions' under which *Pride and Prejudice* was published – its being refused by a publisher in 1797, to be accepted for publication only fifteen years later in 1812— and try to think how far, and in what ways, do realities such as this affect the text?

6.5 LET US SUM UP

Criticism of Jane Austen's work has recently moved from seeing her as an upholder of the 'traditional', to a writer who uses irony to subvert it. Three major strands of criticism are selected for an examination of how their concerns are relevant to a study of Jane Austen. The first of these, **feminist criticism**, involves interrogating the representation of women in the text, and asks whether that representation conforms to the patriarchal norm or not, and if it subverts that norm, in what ways it does so. **Postcolonialism** provides a perspective on the relevance of studying Jane Austen in a context outside the British, as well as looks at the presence (or rather the absence) of imperialism and colonialism in her fiction, asking what are the implications of such authorial choices as the restriction of subject matter. **Marxist thought**, analyses the ideologies inherent in the portrayal of different social classes, and of the nature of social change, in the text, also taking into account the conditions of production of the text.

6.6 GLOSSARY

Patronizing Treatment that is condescending or superior in manner

Tentative Provisional or experimental

Unilaterally Directed towards one side only; not reciprocal

6.7 QUESTIONS

1. Do you agree with the idea that Jane Austen is dealing with a different, 'microscopic' vision of history?
2. Do you see the study of Jane Austen as relevant in the Indian context, and if so, in what ways?
3. Do you think that Jane Austen unequivocally upholds the division of society into classes?

6.8 SUGGESTED READING

Butler, Marilyn *Jane Austen and the War of Ideas*. Oxford: Clarendon, 1975, rptd. 1976.

Harish Trivedi (Ed.) *Jane Austen: An Anthology of Recent Criticism*. Delhi: Pencraft International, 1996.